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Horrors and affirmations

By Peter Keating

IAN WATT:
Conrad in the Nineteenth Century
335pp. Chatto & Windus. £10.50.
07011 24318

"I am rather ashamed of the silly thing I had to send to the *Speaker*", Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett on July 20, 1905. "I think that to say it contains all my philosophy of life is a severe hit. But I suppose you know best, for myself I don't know what my philosophy is. I wasn't even aware I had it. Am sorry to think I must have done you say so. Shall I die of it do you think?"

"Books", the article referred to by Conrad, is far from being a "silly thing": it ranks with the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* as one of Conrad's most deeply-considered published statements of his artistic beliefs. The tone of virtually every sentence of "Books" preaches it to be: most-fascinating and it is difficult to understand why Conrad should have seemed so determined to disown it. Perhaps he simply felt that Garnett's enthusiasm should be put down firmly, even sarcastically; but this feeling itself probably sprang from Conrad's fear that in "Books" he had inadvertently surrendered the "impartial practice of life" which he regarded as critically important to the modern artist. For Conrad, impartiality signified the only possible kind of artistic individuality: without it the artist would fall victim to "journal formulas trying to practice this or that particular method or technique or conception". To pin oneself down in that way would mean admitting in a "philosophy of life": in spite of the semi-jocular tone, it would, for Conrad, be like having a fatal disease. "Shall I die of it do you think?"

Only in the impartial contemplation of life and the gradual maturing of the imagination, Conrad argued, could the artist achieve a promise of perfection for his art. "It might even avail the achievement of his dream". It is characteristic of Conrad that this superb essay, with its scornful rejection of "moral nihilism" and its passionate defence of artistic striving after perfection, should move quietly and ironically to the conclusion that even the artist's dream is unattainable and his vision shared by few people. Garnett's confusion, his eagerness to believe that the positive qualities asserted by Conrad could be taken as piercing through the general view of life's illusory nature, is understandable. Garnett can justifiably be seen as the prototype of the modern Conradian critic, full of wonder at the artistic achievement, and trying to understand every other moment by reality that melts into illusion, by affirmations which might just be denials. It does not help to know that Conrad was enthusiastically working to achieve this kind of effect. "Explicatures," he told another of his correspondents, "is fatal to the pleasure of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion."

Such a view of life and art creates special problems for the literary critic, perhaps making his task impossible in any traditional sense, and certainly encouraging the flurry of contradictory critical interpretations that typifies so much modern academic criticism. It is a problem dear Ian Watt places at the centre of Conrad in the Nineteenth Century. As he points out, the modern literary critic

should move quietly and ironically to the conclusion that even the artist's dream is unattainable and his vision shared by few people. Garnett's confusion, his eagerness to believe that the positive qualities asserted by Conrad could be taken as piercing through the general view of life's illusory nature, is understandable. Garnett can justifiably be seen as the prototype of the modern Conradian critic, full of wonder at the artistic achievement, and trying to understand every other moment by reality that melts into illusion, by affirmations which might just be denials. It does not help to know that Conrad was enthusiastically working to achieve this kind of effect. "Explicatures," he told another of his correspondents, "is fatal to the pleasure of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion."

The biographical parts of Conrad in the Nineteenth Century are based largely on standard published sources and Watt makes no claim for them as original, though they are handled impressively. Conrad's Polish background is given special emphasis as a force in determining attitudes and values that remained important throughout his life. There is Conrad's sense of belonging to a nation which, as he himself explained, had long "been used to go to battle without illusions": his conviction that a stable society needed to be structured hierarchically; his profound conviction that a stable society needed to be structured hierarchically; his profound conviction that a stable society needed to be structured hierarchically.

Watt's placing of Conrad within his historical context raises questions which are more difficult to deal with authoritatively. The virtual absence of imaginative, wide-ranging literary histories of the late nineteenth century—yet another casualty of the modern obsession with literary criticism—combined with the existence of enormous collections of historical material, enforces, in a study like this, a high degree of personal choice.

Watt's solution to the difficulty of Conrad's "attitude of sacred homage to the people of his 'our life'" is driven to seek out "hidden allegorical configurations, thereby laying himself open to the charge of excessive abstraction or extravagant symbol-hunting". Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, the first of a projected two-volume study, is both an exploration of this characteristically modern dilemma and a plea for common sense in our reading of one of the greatest of modern writers. This volume covers only the early stages of Conrad's career as a writer, and focuses on four of

his novels—*Annapolis Folly*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim*. Each of these novels is discussed biographically, historically, and critically, the threefold approach serving primarily to place Conrad within his own special historical moment, but also, one feels, to provide a kind of firm base or safety area which will help Professor Watt to resist the flights of fancy that afflict so many of Conrad's critics.

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is to explore questions of historical significance when and where they are raised by Conrad's novels. So the chapter on *Annapolis Folly* takes up the question of possible formative literary influences on Conrad's earliest novel, notably that of Plautus specifically and French Naturalism more generally; the chapter on *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* provides an opportunity to examine Conrad's views of the close structure of British society in relation to developments in late nineteenth-century sociological theory; and the chapter on *Heart of Darkness* moves into a substantial discussion of Victorian concepts of progress, evolutionary theory, and the extent to which Conrad can be said to be both an Impressionist and a Symbolist; while the discussion of *Lord Jim* explores his experimental technique in the light of changing attitudes in time in the Victorian and early modern novel.

The weakest part of Conrad in the Nineteenth Century is that in which Conrad is related to Victorian fiction. It is undoubtedly true that Conrad learned much of his reverence for the art of fiction from the French. Out, as Professor Watt points out, when looked at closely Conrad is not actually like Plautus or Molière, and although the influence of Henry James is powerfully at work on him during the late 1890s, he is not actually like James either. Of course what is at stake is not primarily a matter of direct influence: for a novelist as individual as Conrad, techniques which were demonstrably learned from Henry James, are assimilated and transformed, while other ideas of equal importance may just have been "in the air" as Watt acknowledges in his reference to Pater. There were, however, more ideas in the air of Victorian Britain than are recognized here: as early as 1853 George Canning, whose novels are admittedly not likely to have provided Conrad with models as followed, could state eloquently that "the secret of art in fiction is the indirect; the indirect, or come to that Browning, might have believed much the same at this time.

The early and mid-Victorian novel is dismissed as having nothing really to contribute to Conrad's artistic development; Dickens is discussed briefly and George Eliot not at all. Maybe

neither novelist influenced Conrad directly, but it is surprising to see such a well-informed modern critic treating them so casually. With George Eliot at least this is a mistake Henry James never made. Even more surprising is the claim that Kipling and Stevenson influenced Conrad only in so far as they played a part in "creating an audience for 'exotic narratives'". That surely does not allow sufficient credit to Kipling's early stories of Anglo-India, or to novels of Stevenson's such as *The Beach of Falesa* and *The Ebb-tide*. James, again, was well aware that Stevenson was far more than a purveyor of "exotic narratives".

In spite of these omissions or false emphases, the wide range of Conrad in the Nineteenth Century is admirable. James, for example, appears tellingly at several points in the book: consideration of Marlow's reasons for lying in Kurtz's "intended" expands upwards to a brilliant explanation of the significance of lies in late nineteenth-century European literature that moves swiftly and expertly over Nietzsche, Henry and William James, and Thomas Mann; while linguistic and philosophical issues are raised constantly. One of the most exciting aspects of the book is the natural ease with which Professor Watt shifts between the biographical, historical, and interpretive approaches to Conrad: though one would, of course, expect nothing less from the author of *The Rise of the Novel*. If the schematic nature of Professor Watt's overall plan still remains too much in evidence this is because of his strong personal preference for critical rather than historical or biographical interpretation: the main emphasis of the book, we are told at the beginning, is "exegesis". Conrad's biographers have carried out valuable research and this is acknowledged and used; the historical questions raised by Conrad's life and novels are, fascinating and made all the more so here; but it is really Conrad's critical that Watt is after.

His opening statement on the purpose of his book is so clear in tone that, given the fragmentary nature of modern literary criticism, it can only be taken as deliberately provocative. That purpose is "to see whether a measure of critical consensus may not be promoted by

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Breaths of change

By Frank Tuohy

NADINE GORDIMER:
A Soldier's Embrace
144pp. Cape. £4.95.
0 224 01778 0.

In "A Soldier's Embrace", the title story of Nadine Gordimer's new collection, the central character finds herself caught up between a black and a white soldier who are celebrating the ceasefire in a newly liberated colony.

Three heads collided gaily, musk of sweat and tang of strong sweet soap clumped a mask to her nose and mouth. They all gazed with a delicious shock. She put up an arm round each neck, the rough pile of an army haircut on one side, the soft negro hair on the other, and kissed them both on the cheek.

The embrace broke the piercing reality of this encounter and the woman throughout the story. The scene must be Mozambique although, with the exception of South Africa, Nadine Gordimer does not name these African countries which are the setting of much of her later fiction. (Presumably new nations have not yet been created, but I do not think Penguin would mind being misinformed.) After the hissing embrace symbolized by the soldiers' embrace, things in the former colony rapidly go from bad to worse. The women and her lawyer husband stick it out under black rule for as long as they can, before finally retreating to the Union, where the husband joins a pros-

perous law firm, in which "he could be satisfied he would be able to uphold the liberal opinions he had always stood for".

The ironies that surround the liberal point of view in a multi-racial society have been a persistent theme in Nadine Gordimer's work. In "A Soldier's Embrace", which is her sixth collection of short stories, Gordimer, with one exception, there are a number of reasons, however, for finding the mixture not quite the same as before.

In the introduction to her Selected Stories, Nadine Gordimer pointed out how far attitudes have changed since she began writing, and how those changes have been reflected in the language. Thus the "natives" of her early stories became "Black" and then later "African". In her view, the last term is singular in being the only one which has not been imposed from above but has been chosen by the black people themselves. (More precisely, though she doesn't suggest this, it was copied from the United States.) On one level her writing can be seen as the most sensitive record we have of the various shifts in attitude—breaths, rather than winds, of change—as they have occurred in South Africa throughout the past forty or so years. The point of view is more limited than this suggests. Although she asserts that all writers, considered as writers, are androgynous, we see her world most clearly and movingly as it affects women, especially good-hearted young girls. Again, in spite of her formal detachment, we are fully aware that it is the point of view of an insider.

A very early story, "Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet?", shows a girl as victim of a black stocker, who steals her money. Later, in "The Wounded", Jennifer Tzeng, "assistant director of a social rehabilitation scheme", flounders disastrously among a group of coloured activists until she finally blurs out "It's hard to be punished for not being black". This new collection of stories, however, records further shifts in attitude. In one of the best stories, "Siblings", Maxine, a charming freckled out nineteen-year-old, is shown dancing with her black cleaning woman and embracing her aunt's cook, "kissing those smooth, innocently seagled fat cheeks as if she had never learned what Lola knew, that white children don't kiss their old Lulu". In another story, "A Hunting Accident", a young Swedish potter is "cradling a reluctant toddler with the holy family reverence Swedish girls display for black children". In a safari truck driven by her lover, the chief's younger son, she holds on to "the hard, cold and tough as the feel of a tortoise's foot, of the old gun-beer who had never before been touched by a white woman".

"The most moving story here, 'Town and Country Lovers', has the form of a diptych, two halves, each of two inter-racial affairs. The town lovers are a visiting Austrian scientist, of vaguely aristocratic background, and a coloured shop-girl. When the low catches up with them, she is subjected to the humiliations of an appalling medical examination. Meanwhile, her Austrian lover betrays her with a humbly typical remark about life bei uns:

"Even in my country it's difficult for a person from a higher class to marry one from a lower class." The latter half of the story tells of a poor farm boy's tragic love for a black girl he had played with as a child, and culminates in his acquittal for the murder of their baby.

A hard-won humanism is characteristic of these stories of an influential society. But they are also very selective, which is what one wants in suggest by saying that they are the stories of an insider. The outsider, of course, is likely to see only caricatures: you remember those terrifying white ladies out shopping in Salisbury, Rhodesia, who used to get interviewed by TV reporters; you think of those rugged players, to whom race contempt is an aspect of wit; or you recall mad conversations with strangers who suddenly reveal their obsessions.

But Nadine Gordimer has no time for such banalities. She works in a different field, almost resembling that of Frances Tover, the protagonist of "Open House", one of her most acutely ironic stories: "Frances Tover was on the secret circuit for people who wanted to find out the truth about South Africa." In Frances Tover's case the truth, "the real thing", means a meeting with black Africans. Unfortunately, under the toughest apartheid laws of the 1950s, Frances can only provide introductions to time-servers, phony black collaborators with the régime. To the visitor from Washington, however, it is all the same. "He knew; too, that he wouldn't be there long enough to find out that perhaps you had to live and die here to find out."

Sometimes there is the suspicion that the American visitor may have had a point. He expected something overt, readily condemned, and was faced with subtleties he could not assimilate. With the reader, there is the feeling that a particular society has been described with too much particularity: certainly some of Nadine Gordimer's early stories tend to be loaded down with evocative detail. To adapt Chekhov's dictum, there were usually several guns on the wall which were there purely for ornamentation, and never looked like going off before the end of the story.

As a result, the effect of the narrative was somewhat muted. The scene had been meticulously set, and a number of characters described and established in their setting, there would be a sudden heightening of language, until the story concluded with a little swirl of rhetoric, like the tail of a fish disappearing into deeper waters.

Such writing was impressive because it belonged to its time, to the 1950s and early 1960s, when novelists aimed at representing people's general confusion about life, and were supported in this by

critics like Lionel Trilling. A Soldier's Embrace reminds us how far we have come since then. There is no longer the sense of being briefed by an expert. Yet the growth of a self-regarding aesthetic attitude, the effect of the "Me" generation on much modern fiction, has left few traces on the life portrayed here; even Maxine, the rioting adolescent, is still pathetically full of concern for and involvement with other people. Nevertheless, the formalistic concern which are at present fashionable may have left their mark on the technique. There is rather a lot of what the French call, in a derogatory sense, "littérature"; perhaps the Anglo-Saxon equivalent is "creative writing".

When the physical world is evoked, it is presented with more economy than was previously the case as when the two soldiers embrace the lawyer's wife, or in "A Hunting Accident", where a heap of dead wildbeasts is seen in a "a party clankroom pile of pain and blood". Four or five of the stories here are as finely achieved as anything Nadine Gordimer has done.

There seems to be a rule that the shorter a piece of prose, the more precise and accurate the writing should be. It is hard to feel that this is the case here with the brief experimental pieces, "A Day on the Preway" and "For Dear Life". Both are written in the sort of semi-poetic paragraph which seems better in French than in English. "For Dear Life", which takes place in France, brings in a subject which has turned up rather frequently lately, the reactions and comments of a child still in the womb: "Swaying along in the howdah of her belly I make pronouncement on steep streets." Another story, "The Terminus", takes the form of an extended simile, and not a very adventurous one, which compares the mother of a family to the queen ant which sees workmen unearthing from the foundations of the linch.

It seems likely that writers have themselves to develop, less because of a desire to alter the range of their subject matter, than because they have gone to the making of their previous work. Since Nadine Gordimer published her first story, there have been many changes going on: there have been Borges, and Nabokov, and the expression "New Yorker story" means something rather different from what it used to. Perhaps there is something rather discouraging in experiment, for exportation's sake. In the end one must register a strong preference for the direct, almost bald, style of a story like "Town and Country Lovers", not only because it gives straight to the relevant points, but also from the suggestion that it is so much harder to bring off successfully.

Lear and Cordelia Approach the Rivers of Hades

Why should she not creep under my clank
Out of the storm? Her husband
Is beyond the seas and there
The days are blue like the blossom
Strong on the stalk.

Here are hail and thunder
The horizon greets the beasts creep under the hedge
Do you also creep under my cloak
We will live with the shepherds and with the foxes
And eat our bread under the hollyhock
And tell strange tales and fancies
Until the sun is back.

O lady Fortune
Vouchsafe a death under the hedge
Within one clank, out of the strident sun!

I
Am wounded to death: Let her not die
Let her rather be my companion
As far as that river.

They shall go back
Sowed from oblivion out in her mouth
The sleepy taste of that river.

J. M. Cameron

WITOLD GOMBROWICZ:

Possessed
Translated by J. A. Underwood.
221pp. Marion Boyars. £6.95.
0 7145 2684 3

Although Witold Gombrowicz's major works have been available in English translation for some years they have yet to secure in this country the reputation they have long enjoyed on the continent, and especially in France: they have yet to become part of our intellectual furniture. The publication of *Possessed* provides an appropriate occasion for a review of an odd career and an intriguing oeuvre.

The elusiveness of Gombrowicz's life is indeed partly traceable to the facts of his biography. His life was divided between three countries, and much of his work won only belated recognition even in his native Poland. He was born in Warsaw in 1903. He studied law, but had a keen interest in philosophy. His pre-war publications included the play *Princess Irene* and the novel *Ferdynand*. The latter work seems to have raised considerable interest and controversy in Poland, but not outside it. It happened that at the time of the German invasion in 1939, Gombrowicz was on a trip to Argentina. Understandably he chose to remain there—and in fact did not return to Europe for more than twenty years. For much of this time he seems to have been virtually a forgotten figure. A Spanish translation of *Ferdynand* was published in Buenos Aires in 1947, but made little impact internationally. A play, *The Marriage*, written a year previously, was not to receive its first production until 1963 in Paris.

In the immediate post-war period, Gombrowicz's work still attracted attention in Polish émigré circles in France, but essentially his "rediscovery" began in Poland itself in the brief "thaw" that followed the rebellion of 1956. *Ferdynand* was published again in Warsaw, after an interval of twenty years, with judicious and dramatic success. But to read the plays and the novels side by side is to become aware how steadily and ingeniously Gombrowicz explores the same few fundamental problems.

His general concern is with the elusiveness of individual identity, as conventionally defined. He claims in *Ferdynand*:
... a human being does not externalise himself directly and immediately in conformity with his own nature: he invariably does so by way of some definite form; and that form, style, way of speaking and responding, do not derive solely from him, but are imposed on him from without—and the same man can express himself

negatively in 1960, and *Cosmos* in 1965. Gombrowicz came back to Europe in 1961, eventually to settle in the South of France. He died in 1969.

Britain has tended to experience Gombrowicz's works somewhat at third hand: they have come to us via France. (J. A. Underwood's version of *The Possessed* is explicitly based on a French translation published three years ago.) His plays have not made the same impact in London as in most European capitals. There must be some danger that Gombrowicz will be permanently relegated to that considerable category of continental writers who are praised in England dutifully, but somewhat dismissively, as being clever and complex—but the subtleties—no quite our cup of tea.

There is at least one good reason for this. In this particular case, Polish admirers of Gombrowicz confirm what the English texts of his work—admirable though these have been to themselves—repeatedly suggest: that his prose is particularly recalcitrant to translation. He modulates into pastiche, slang, dialect and invented, neologism, whimsy and gibberish. These can be no doubt that he is a writer with a fastidious concern for stylistic flavouring; and in translation that flavouring will almost certainly be altered, diluted or altogether lost.

If distortions of this kind seem eventually to matter a good deal less than the reading of a single translation would suggest, it is because Gombrowicz's ideas, as displayed throughout his literary career, have a consistency and coherence that easily survive the stylistic diminution. There is a natural critical tendency to separate the plays from the novels. Gombrowicz the dramatist is readily assimilated into the Theatre of the Absurd: there are obvious comparisons with Beckett and Ionesco, even though his theatrical experiments antedated theirs by many years. The novels, on the other hand, resemble the work of Sartre in certain significant ways. It is tempting to make a facile distinction between philosophical fiction and surrealist drama. But to read the plays and the novels side by side is to become aware how steadily and ingeniously Gombrowicz explores the same few fundamental problems.

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Gothic remains

By Michael Irwin

Leaven his deeper meanings with self-mockery and nonsensicality. He is often very funny and never solemn.

All this should be a preliminary to a claim that *Possessed*, though admittedly a minor work, reflects the author's characteristic concerns and sheds an interesting light on this or that aspect of his thought. Unfortunately such a claim cannot be made. Certainly *Possessed* is a minor production—a Gothic novel published pseudonymously as a newspaper serial in the summer of 1939. Gombrowicz apparently did not acknowledge authorship until shortly before his death. The reticence is understandable: it seems possible that he wrote the work largely to make a fast sale.

Merely as "a Gothic novel", however, *Possessed* has a lot to be said for it. The story begins with Wald, a young tennis coach, arriving at a remote country house where he is to give tuition to Miss Moya. Quickly a strange affinity is established between them—an affinity that seems to exacerbate the worst impulses of both. Eventually they sense a connection between this unhealthy relationship and a haunted room in the enormous manor house, where a crazed old priest lives in terror-stricken seclusion, oppressed by some guilty secret. And so forth. At first the narrative is delectable and imaginatively developed; the book offers fast, suspenseful reading. Gombrowicz talismans the traditional nonsense of the genre: "What, meanwhile, had been happening at the castle— that age-old giant of brick and stone whose awning-skirted tower loomed formidable in the gathering dusk, and within whose proud and massive walls, guardians of bygone pomp and the traces of a vanished splendour, passion, fear, and madness held sway?" About the halfway point, however, the story-telling becomes weary and jerky. Several of the main characters depart to

Warsaw for a vaguely-defined period of time. Even an entertaining minor character cannot compensate for the disappearance of the claustrophobic confinement that any Gothic tale needs if it is to achieve true rottenness.

The story recovers much of its energy in the later chapters where the action centres once more on the country house and the castle with its haunted room. In fact the narrative is moving quite powerfully towards a juicy conclusion which will make sense of all that has gone before—when it stops. It seems necessary for a reviewer to stress a point that is made neither on the cover of this volume nor in the introductory note: this is an incomplete work. The incompleteness could presumably have been an authorial jest. Alternatively it may have had something to do with the fact that the final instalment of the serial version apparently came out on August 30, 1939, in either case the publishers say nothing about the matter—an omission that may irritate those members of the public who purchase what they reasonably assume to be a complete narrative.

J. A. Underwood's English version reads well—well enough to make the incompleteness of the story that much more disappointing. But it is impossible to see *Possessed* as a "serious" work. One or two themes, one or two formulations—"She tried to stir her heart into feeling the emotion that was exhibiting"—are characteristic of the author's work, but only in a trivial way. Granted his preoccupations, the idea of "possession" of the usurpation of personality, is one that he might well have turned to account. Certainly he would have been unlikely to see the frivolousness of the genre as inimical to serious comment of some kind. The inference must be that *Possessed* was no more than a light-hearted, perhaps no more than a half-hearted, technical exercise.

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